

REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

Does It Exist?

SYNOPSIS

Local traffic congestion, as every San Diego driver knows, is approaching that of Los Angeles. The Grand Jury, as a result of numerous complaints by citizens that transportation congestion is reaching intolerable levels, decided to investigate whether adequate methods are being used to plan and fund transportation projects in San Diego County.

The San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) is mandated by the State to cooperate with CalTrans in highway planning and in preparing funding priorities for San Diego County. To that end, SANDAG prepares and periodically updates a Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) for the County of San Diego. Although SANDAG is the designated regional transportation planning organization for San Diego County, the Jury discovered that SANDAG cannot assure implementation of regional arterial projects within a specific jurisdiction. Since construction of some regionally significant arterials may not be supported by individual cities, the overall results in terms of regional transportation planning by SANDAG are far from optimal.

Aside from its own investigation, the Grand Jury requested that the San Diego County Auditor's Office review the methods used by SANDAG to evaluate and prioritize transportation projects. The Grand Jury recommends that SANDAG adopt and/or improve its project ranking methodologies for regional transportation, transit, interchange, and highway projects. In addition, SANDAG should develop a methodology for prioritizing funding between alternative transportation mode projects (e.g., arterials vs. highway vs. transit projects).

The Grand Jury recognizes that SANDAG has prepared and forwarded to the State a proposal to strengthen its ability to propose and fund regional transportation projects (San Diego Regional Plan Legislation, SB 1703 and AB 2095). Based upon our investigation, we strongly support the need for a more comprehensive regional approach to transportation and related land use planning. The Grand Jury strongly recommends that each Member Agency of SANDAG support passage of this legislation.

ISSUES

1. Does SANDAG use a formal, criteria-driven process to identify, evaluate, and prioritize highway projects?
2. How does SANDAG identify, evaluate, prioritize, and fund arterial street projects?
3. How does SANDAG evaluate and prioritize freeway-to-freeway projects?
4. How does SANDAG identify, evaluate, prioritize, and program rail and bus transit projects?
5. Why do the criteria and processes used by SANDAG to evaluate, prioritize, and fund transportation projects vary depending on the type of project (e.g., highway, interchange, arterial, and transit projects)?
6. How does SANDAG determine funding priorities for various projects (highway, arterial, interchanges, and transit) vis-à-vis each other. And, how does SANDAG determine and ensure that the highest regional priorities are met, regardless of project type?
7. Does SANDAG have sufficient authority to make and implement difficult but important decisions related to the development of the regional transportation system?
8. Do mechanisms exist, within the present identification and prioritization system, to address regional transportation proposals adequately?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The 2001-2002 San Diego County Grand Jury commenced its study partly in response to statements made by County of San Diego Supervisors Bill Horn and Dianne Jacob, as well as citizen complaints. In her State of the County speech given in January of 2000, County Supervisor Jacob, discussing transportation congestion, was critical of SANDAG's role stating, "SANDAG is dominated by parochial special interests." Supervisor Horn, at the San Diego North County Transportation Summit, held in May of 2001, stated, "North San Diego County is not getting its fair share of transportation funding."

SANDAG develops regional plans for transportation, growth management, housing, open space, recycling, and hazardous waste management. SANDAG is governed by representatives from its 19 member agencies (the County and its 18 incorporated cities). These representatives are each designated by the board or

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council of their agency and are each elected officers within these agencies. Supplementing these voting members of SANDAG are advisory representatives from Metropolitan Transit Development Board (MTDB), North County Transit District (NCTD), the U.S. Department of Defense, California Department of Transportation (CalTrans), the San Diego Unified Port District, the San Diego County Water Authority, and Tijuana/Baja California/Mexico.

This report focuses on SANDAG's responsibility for regional transportation planning. Coordinating planning and developing public policy for all modes of travel in the County (both people and freight) are among the responsibilities of SANDAG. It periodically prepares a Regional Transportation Plan (RTP), which contains the principal transportation policies and funding priorities for San Diego County. The present RTP identifies the facilities, services, and programs necessary to help meet the region's travel needs through 2020. This RTP contains two long-range funding plans.

In addition to the *preferred plan* (costing \$30 billion), that requires additional transportation funding, the *Revenue-Constrained Transportation Plan* includes facilities and programs limited to the amount of funding (\$18 billion) available if existing state and federal programs remain in force, and the TransNet one-half percent local sales tax program is not extended beyond its current 2008 expiration.

SANDAG is now preparing an RTP for 2030. For the 2030 RTP, a third financial scenario is being developed that would be more optimistic than the "revenue-constrained" scenario, while more realistic than the "preferred scenario." This middle course scenario would be the basis for developing, prioritizing, and funding potential 2030 RTP transportation projects.

Inherent in the development of all these plans is the need for a comprehensive system of developing, evaluating, and selecting the "best" ways to spend these funds. SANDAG has adopted a policy that transportation funding consists of a balanced set of region wide transportation improvements among highway improvements, local streets, and public transit projects.¹ This formula was developed based upon opinions of residents and local leadership groups, as determined by survey research.

In each of these transportation areas, it is necessary to develop a prioritization methodology. SANDAG and the California Department of Transportation (CalTrans) have developed a prioritization system for freeways, interchanges and highways. SANDAG and local jurisdictions have developed a prioritization system for arterial highways. SANDAG and the transit operators—North County Transit District (NCTD) and the Metropolitan Transit Development Board (MTDB)—are in the process of developing a prioritization system for transit.

¹ SANDAG, *2020 Regional Transportation Plan*, April 2000, p. 24.

SANDAG states in the *2020 RTP*, with regard to transportation funding, “programming actions should be based upon the relative ranking of candidate projects against criteria that measure cost-effectiveness, travel time savings, system continuity and efficiency, safety, economic development, and travel demand management. Programming decisions also should be consistent with the regional strategies/smart growth principles and the need to preserve critical habitat.”² Among other projects, 46 highway/freeway projects were rated, ranked, and discussed in the *2020 RTP*—8 in South Bay, 12 in North County, 16 in East County, and 10 in Central San Diego area.

SANDAG can and has proposed projects for funding (in the areas of freeways, highways, and transit) and, as part of the planning process used in corridor studies, has evaluated various regional arterial projects. SANDAG itself does not propose regional arterial projects for funding, but evaluates and prioritizes those projects nominated by its member agencies.

PROCEDURES EMPLOYED

The Grand Jury requested an audit of SANDAG’s transportation planning function. The primary objective of this review by the San Diego County Auditor was to assess the effectiveness of SANDAG processes and procedures governing the identification, evaluation, prioritization, and funding allocation decision process for highway, arterial, and interchange transportation projects. The audit included an assessment of SANDAG’s application of these project evaluation and prioritization processes, including an analysis of source documentation for the 46 highway projects ranked in the *2020 RTP* and the *1998 Regional Transportation Improvement Program (RTIP)*, which was updated in 2000. Additionally, the accounting was to monitor these same processes as they are being utilized by SANDAG to develop the 2002 RTIP and the 2030 RTP.

The performance audit initially addressed the first seven questions identified under “Issues” in this report. Upon a preliminary review of audit results, the Grand Jury requested the auditors take a specific example of a regional transportation proposal—the North County Parkways Plan developed by County Supervisor Slater—and evaluate if mechanisms exist within the present transportation planning system in San Diego County to prioritize such a multi-city regional transportation proposal. The Parkways Plan was selected because it has been widely publicized, includes arterials in the jurisdictions of four different member agencies, will save many hours of commuting time per year, and likely would not be nominated by any one member agency to SANDAG for consideration in transportation planning for the 2020 or the 2030 RTP under current SANDAG policies.

² *Ibid.*

The audit is attached to this report as Appendix A, and the procedures utilized in performing this audit are contained therein. In addition to the audit work performed by the County Auditor's office, the Grand Jury:

- Participated in a transportation planning symposium hosted by the State of California.
- Interviewed the Deputy Director and the Head of Transportation Planning of SANDAG.
- Dialogued with County Supervisors Horn and Slater.
- Performed an analysis of differences in priority ranking for highway projects between the draft and final versions of the 2020 RTP.
- Studied an analysis of the differences in ranking results for a new arterial project between (1) those submitted by the transportation director of the sponsoring city and (2) those calculated by the transportation director of a neighboring city.
- Conducted an analysis of the amount of congestion relief provided by two regional transportation proposals--The Parkways Plan and the Oceanside-to-Escondido Light Rail System.
- Documented (including photos) a number of arterial highway dead ends that occur at the boundaries of cities.

The audit report prepared for the 2001-2002 San Diego County Grand Jury by the Audits Division of the County of San Diego forms the basis for facts, conclusions and recommendations in the balance of this report.

FACTS

- A. Currently, SANDAG relies on local governments (member agencies) to identify and nominate **arterial** projects. Cities sponsoring projects must submit information on standardized qualitative and quantitative criteria developed by SANDAG. SANDAG's Cities/County Technical Advisory Committee (CTAC), with the support of SANDAG staff, reviews the data provided by sponsoring jurisdictions and generates quantitative and qualitative scores, thereby ranking arterial road projects. SANDAG oversight does not ensure that the most critical arterial street projects are

funded.³ The auditors noted “While local government transportation engineers are most likely the ones who identify needed projects, their primary focus is probably on the needs of their respective communities rather than those of the greater regional arterial system.”⁴

- B. Numerous examples exist around the County of critical **arterial** street connections that have not been built or that have been blockaded by neighboring agencies. (See photographs of examples in Appendix B).⁵
- C. SANDAG first developed a formal criteria for **highway** projects in 1997. This criteria was utilized to rank highway projects in the 2020 RTP and the 1998 and 2000 RTIPs. Most criteria are driven by data; however, the criteria for “compatibility with adopted habitat plans” and “service to major employment areas” were subject to modification throughout the process.

The auditor reported, “. . . our review revealed that the [Transportation Sub-] Committee . . . altered the initial draft qualitative scores for 14 of the 46 highway projects included in the final rankings. For the majority of these projects, the scores for two criteria were altered, including the criteria used to measure the ability of a project to serve major employment areas and to comply with adopted habitat preservation plans. These criteria appear to be more subjective than those that rely on more quantifiable data.”⁶

- D. In 1998, CTAC developed formal criteria for evaluating and prioritizing **interchange** projects identified by CalTrans and SANDAG. Changes are needed to make these criteria more consistent with highway project evaluation criteria. The auditor’s report stated “. . . SANDAG was reviewing and updating both the interchange deficiency report, and the criteria used for evaluating and prioritizing these projects. . . . The update resulted in part because of ‘an increasing interest in the benefits of providing these missing freeway ramp connectors and the costs involved in constructing them . . . ‘ Changes are being considered for various interchange criteria in order to make them ‘more consistent’ with highway project evaluation criteria.”⁷

³ Audits Division, County of San Diego, *Review of the SANDAG Transportation Planning Function*, February 2, 2002, pp. 10-11. Arterials are defined as signalized streets serving primarily through traffic .

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵ Photographs of Cannon, Melrose and College avenues.

⁶ Audits Division, *op. cit.*, p. 8. Highways are defined as state or federally-designated urban or rural routes designed to accommodate lengthy trips in the region (e.g., SR78, SR94, and SR125).

⁷ *Ibid.* Interchange refers to on/off ramps from freeways, such as from I-5 to I-805 or I-8 to I-805, as well as between freeways and highways, like I-15 to SR78 or SR52 to I-5.

- E. Funding for arterial street projects and freeway-to-freeway projects has not been a high funding priority of the SANDAG Board. The auditors wrote “Like arterial street projects, it appears that freeway-to-freeway interchange projects have not been a high funding priority of the SANDAG Board. In fact . . . it appears that these projects received no formal funding consideration until 1998.”⁸
- F. A criteria-driven project evaluation process has not been developed for **transit** funding proposals. SANDAG, NCTD and MTDB are collaborating on the development of a program to identify, evaluate and prioritize transit projects. Reliance on MTDB and NCTD to identify and propose transit projects can result in transit projects critical to the entire regional transportation system not being identified or funded.⁹

The audit report indicated that, “A possible area of concern regarding transit planning processes concerns how the SANDAG Board has made discretionary funding allocation decisions for regional transit projects in the past without utilizing a formal project evaluation and prioritization process. While reliance on the MTDB and NCTD to identify and propose transit projects certainly has merit, those boards have transit needs and priorities specific to the geographic regions they represent. Therefore, it is possible that transit projects that are critical to the entire regional transportation system may not become a high priority by either board, and as a result not be funded by SANDAG. The more formal criteria-driven project evaluation process being developed collaboratively between SANDAG and these boards might alleviate this concern.”¹⁰

- G. SANDAG does not have a formal system for making discretionary funding allocation decisions between transportation projects using *different modes* of transport (e.g., arterials vs. highways vs. transit). It also does not have a formal funding distribution formula for allocating discretionary transportation funds between *different areas/municipalities* within the region. The auditors stated, “While some types of transportation funds are earmarked for specific projects or are distributed geographically according to formulas (e.g., TransNet funds), discretionary dollars allocated by SANDAG are not governed by such requirements. As such, the formal criteria-driven project evaluation processes and sophisticated transportation modeling processes utilized by SANDAG help to drive discretionary funding decisions but do not actually make them. Ultimately,

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Generally MTDB is concerned with transit planning in those parts of the County south of Del Mar, while the NCTD is concerned with transit planning in those parts north of Del Mar.

it is a political body, i.e., the SANDAG Board, who determines how to allocate discretionary transportation dollars within the region.”¹¹

- H. While SANDAG has the authority to generate regional arterial projects within or across local jurisdictions in conjunction with local agencies, the final authority for implementing these projects rests with the local jurisdictions. “Several sources indicated that SANDAG’s regional planning authority was impeded by local government jurisdictions who oppose projects even if SANDAG considers the projects to be in the best interest of the regional transportation system.”¹²

The auditor reported that the North County Parkways Plan, a regional transportation project, contains multiple components and involves several North County jurisdictions. If this project were to be nominated formally by a member agency to SANDAG for consideration (which would require the endorsement of all affected jurisdictions), it would be difficult for SANDAG to evaluate and prioritize the project as a whole using its current project evaluation and prioritization structure. According to SANDAG personnel interviewed, member agencies rarely nominate projects that affect multiple jurisdictions.¹³

- I. SANDAG acknowledges that limitations and barriers exist regarding its ability to conduct effective and efficient regional transportation planning. It has forwarded a plan it believes will correct these problems to the State Legislature. This proposal, entitled “San Diego Regional Agency” and identified as SB 1703 (Peace) and AB 2095 (Kehoe), is designed to streamline government decision making and planning by¹⁴:
- Improving coordination among the 18 cities, County government, and other agencies;
 - Providing a “Regional Plan” to make local plans work more effectively and efficiently;
 - Building on the foundation of the cities’ and County’s general plans;
 - Offering a “big picture” perspective to better maintain our quality of life;
 - Linking land use and public transportation policy decisions;
 - Consolidating transportation planning, programming, and project development;
 - Providing for more and better commuter and other travel choices;

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁴ State of California, Senate Bill 1703 (Peace) and Assembly Bill 2095 (Kehoe). Text from a summary of the legislation prepared by SANDAG.

- Getting regional transportation projects completed across jurisdictional boundaries;
- Enhancing opportunities for additional state and federal funding;
- Protecting and preserving open space and habitat for people's enjoyment;
- Addressing the need for a comprehensive vision and plan for the border region;
- Offering a governance model inclusive of all 19 local city and County governments; and
- Providing permanence.

FINDINGS

- I. SANDAG has developed and uses formal criteria-driven processes to identify, evaluate, and prioritize **highway** projects. The criteria for "compatibility with adopted habitat plans" and "service to major employment areas" are qualitative rather than quantitative.
- II. Formal criteria-driven processes to evaluate and prioritize **interchange** projects exist, but require revision to make this criteria more consistent with highway project evaluation criteria.
- III. Formal criteria-driven processes to identify, evaluate, and prioritize **transit** projects are under development.
- IV. Formal criteria-driven processes to identify, evaluate, and prioritize **arterial** transportation projects that involve multiple jurisdictions do not exist. Formal criteria-driven processes are used for freeway, highway, and transit projects that cross-jurisdictional boundaries, while regional arterial projects are normally nominated for funding on a jurisdictional basis.
- V. There is no formal process utilized by SANDAG to allocate funding, especially discretionary funding, among alternative transportation mode projects, like arterial vs. highway vs. freeway vs. transit vs. bike routes.
- VI. SANDAG's ability to conduct effective regional transportation planning is impeded by its lack of authority to override local governments which oppose a project, even when SANDAG determines such a project to be in the best interest of the regional transportation system. The proposed "San Diego Regional Agency" will cause SANDAG to become much more effective in its regional transportation planning function.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG):

- 02-25:** Modify the highway evaluation process to include more formal, data-driven criteria for “compatibility with habitat plans” and “service to employment areas.”
- 02-26:** Update the criteria for evaluating freeway interchange projects and prepare a revised priority ranking for such projects.
- 02-27:** Formulate a ranking system for transit projects and prepare a ranked list of future transit projects.
- 02-28:** Adopt a ranking methodology for evaluating and funding regional transportation projects.
- 02-29:** Develop a ranking methodology for prioritizing funding between alternative transportation mode projects (e.g., arterials vs. highway vs. transit).

That each Member Agency of SANDAG:

- 02-30:** Support passage of the San Diego Regional Agency legislation (SB1703 and AB2095).

REQUIREMENTS AND INSTRUCTIONS

The California Penal Code §933(c) requires any public agency which the Grand Jury has reviewed, and about which it has issued a final report, to comment to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the agency. Such comment shall be made *no later than 90 days* after the Grand Jury publishes its report (filed with the Clerk of the Court); except that in the case of a report containing findings and recommendations pertaining to a department or agency headed by an elected County official (e.g. District Attorney, Sheriff, etc.), such comment shall be made *within 60 days* to the Presiding Judge with an information copy sent to the Board of Supervisors.

Furthermore, California Penal Code §933.05(a), (b), (c), details, as follows, the manner in which such comment(s) are to be made:

- (a) As to each grand jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:
 - (1) The respondent agrees with the finding;

- (2) The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefore.
- (b) As to each grand jury recommendation, the responding person or entity shall report one of the following actions:
 - (1) The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action.
 - (2) The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation.
 - (3) The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.
 - (4) The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefore.
- (c) If a finding or recommendation of the grand jury addresses budgetary or personnel matters of a county agency or department headed by an elected officer, both the agency or department head and the Board of Supervisors shall respond if requested by the grand jury, but the response of the Board of Supervisors shall address only those budgetary or personnel matters over which it has some decision making authority. The response of the elected agency or department head shall address all aspects of the findings or recommendations affecting his or her agency or department.

Comments to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court in compliance with the Penal Code §933.05 are required by the date indicated from:

RESPONDING AGENCY	RECOMMENDATIONS	DATE
San Diego Association of Government (SANDAG)	02-25 through 02-29	08/21/02
Each Member Agency of SANDAG City of Carlsbad	02-30	08/21/02

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**City of Chula Vista
City of Coronado
City of Del Mar
City of El Cajon
City of Encinitas
City of Escondido
City of Imperial Beach
City of La Mesa
City of Lemon Grove
City of National City
City of Oceanside
City of Poway
City of San Diego
City of San Marcos
City of Santee
City of Solana Beach
City of Vista
County of San Diego**
